

IN THE DARK.

BY MARY E. PENN.

"IT is the strangest, most unaccountable thing I ever knew ! I don't think I am superstitious, but I can't help fancying that —— "

Ethel left the sentence unfinished, wrinkling her brows in a thoughtful frown as she gazed into the depths of her empty tea-cup.

"What has happened?" I enquired, glancing up from the Money Article of the *Times* at my daughter's pretty, puzzled face. "Nothing uncanny, I hope? You haven't discovered that a 'ghost' is included among the fixtures of our new house?"

This new house, The Cedars, was a pretty old-fashioned river-side villa between Richmond and Kew, which I had taken furnished, as a summer residence, and to which we had only just removed.

Let me state, in parenthesis, by way of introducing myself to the reader, that I, John Dysart, am a widower with one child: the blue-eyed, fair-haired young lady who sat opposite to me at the breakfast table that bright June morning: and that I have been for many years the manager of an old-established Life Insurance Company in the City.

"What is the mystery?" I repeated, as Ethel did not reply.

She came out of her brown study, and looked at me impressively.

"It really is a mystery, papa, and the more I think of it the more puzzled I am."

"I am in the dark at present as to what 'it' may be," I reminded her.

"Something that happened last night. You know that adjoining my bedroom there is a large, dark closet, which can be used as a box or store-room?"

"I had forgotten the fact, but I will take your word for it. Well, Ethel?"

"Well, last night I was restless, and it was some hours before I could sleep. When at last I did so, I had a strange dream about that closet. It seemed that as I lay in bed I heard a noise within, as if someone were knocking at the door, and a child's voice, broken by sobs, crying piteously 'Let me out, let me out!' I thought that I got out of bed and opened the door, and there, crouching all in a heap against the wall, was a little boy; a pretty, pale little fellow of six or seven, looking half wild with fright. At the same moment I woke."

"And lo, it was a dream!" I finished. "If that is all Ethel ——"

"But it is not," she interposed. "The strangest part of the story has to come. The dream was so vivid that when I woke I sat up in

bed, and looked towards the closet door, almost expecting to hear the sounds again. Papa, you may believe me or not, but it is a fact that I *did* hear them, the muffled knocking, and the pitiful cry. As I listened, it grew fainter and fainter and at length ceased altogether. Then I summoned courage to get out of bed and open the door. There was no living creature in the place. Was it not mysterious?" she concluded. "What can it mean?"

I glanced at her with a smile, as I refolded the paper and rose from my chair.

"It means, my dear, that you had night-mare last night. Let me recommend you for the future not to eat cucumber at dinner."

"No, papa," she interrupted. "I was broad awake, and I heard the child's voice as plainly as I ever heard a sound in my life."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"I was afraid to stir till the sound had ceased; but if I ever hear it again, I will let you know at once."

"Be sure you do. Meantime, suppose you come into the garden," I continued, throwing open the French windows; "the morning air will blow all these cobwebs from your brain."

Ethel complied, and for the present I heard no more of the subject.

Some days passed away, and we began to feel quite at home in our new quarters.

A more delightful summer retreat than The Cedars could hardly be imagined, with its cool, dusky rooms, from which the sunlight was excluded by the screen of foliage outside; its trellised verandah, overgrown with creepers, and its smooth lawn, shaded by the rare old cedar-trees which gave the place its name.

Our friends soon discovered its attractions and took care that we should not stagnate for want of society. We kept open house; lawn-tennis, garden-parties, and boating excursions were the order of the day. It was glorious summer weather, the days warm and golden, the nights starlit and still.

One night, having important letters to finish, I sat up writing after all the household were in bed. The window was open, and at intervals I glanced up from my paper across the moonlit lawn, where the shadows of the cedars lay dark and motionless. Now and then a great downy moth would flutter in and hover round the shaded lamp; now and then the swallows under the eaves uttered a faint, sleepy chirp. For all other signs and sounds of life I might have been the only watcher in all the sleeping world.

I had finished my task and was just closing my writing-case when I heard a hurried movement in the room above—Ethel's. Footsteps descended the stairs, and the next moment the dining-room door opened, and Ethel appeared, in a long, white dressing-gown, with a small night-lamp in her hand.

There was a look on her face which made me start up and exclaim:

"What is the matter? What has happened?"

She set down the lamp and came towards me.

"I have heard it again," she breathed, laying her hand on my wrist.

"You have heard—what?"

"The noise in the box-room."

I stared at her a moment in bewilderment, and then half smiled.

"Oh, is that it?" I exclaimed, in a tone of relief. "You have been dreaming again, it seems."

"I have not been asleep at all," she replied. "The sounds have kept me awake. They are louder than the first time; the child seems to be sobbing and crying as if his heart would break. It is miserable to hear it."

"Have you looked inside?" I asked, impressed in spite of myself by her manner.

"No, I dared not to-night. I was afraid of seeing—something," she returned with a shiver.

"Come, we must get to the bottom of this mystery," I said cheerfully, and taking up the lamp I led the way upstairs to her room.

As the door of the mysterious closet was level with the wall, and papered like it, I did not perceive it till Ethel pointed it out. I listened with my ear close to it, but heard not the faintest sound, and after waiting a moment, threw it open and looked in, holding the lamp so that every corner was lighted. It was a cramped, close, airless place, the ceiling (which was immediately below the upper staircase) sloping at an acute angle to the floor. A glance showed me that it contained nothing but a broken chair and a couple of empty boxes.

Slightly shrugging my shoulders, I closed the door.

"Your ghost is 'vox et præterea nihil,' it seems," I remarked drily.

"Don't you think, Ethel, you may have been ——"

Ethel held up her hand, motioning me to silence.

"Hark," she whispered, "there it is again! But it is dying away now. Listen ——"

I complied, half infected by her excitement, but within and without the house all was profoundly still.

"There—it has ceased," she said at length, drawing a deep breath.

"You heard it, did you not?"

I shook my head. "My dear Ethel, there was nothing to hear."

She opened her blue eyes to their widest.

"Papa—am I not to believe the evidence of my own senses?"

"Not when they are affected by nervous excitement. If you give way to this fancy, you will certainly make yourself ill. See how you tremble! Come, lie down again, and try to sleep."

"Not here," she returned, glancing round with a shudder. "I shall go to the spare chamber. Nothing would induce me to spend another night in this room."

I said no more, but I felt perplexed and uneasy. It was so unlike Ethel to indulge in superstitious fancies that I began to fear she must be seriously out of health, and I resolved for my own satisfaction to have a doctor's opinion regarding her.

It happened that our nearest neighbour was a physician, whom I knew by repute, though not personally acquainted with him. After breakfast, without mentioning my intention to my daughter, I sent a note to Dr. Cameron, requesting him to call at his earliest convenience.

He came without delay : a tall, grey-bearded man of middle age, with a grave, intelligent face, observant eyes and sympathetic manner.

"His patient received him with undisguised astonishment, and on learning that he had called at my request she gave me a look of mute reproach.

"I am sorry that papa troubled you, Dr. Cameron. There is really nothing whatever the matter with me," she said.

And indeed at that moment, with flushed cheeks, and eyes even brighter than usual, she looked as little like an invalid as could well be imagined.

"My dear Ethel," I interposed, "when people take to dreaming startling dreams, and hearing supernatural sounds, it is a sign of something wrong with either mind or body—as I am sure Dr. Cameron will tell you."

The doctor started perceptibly. "Ah—is that Miss Dysart's case?" he enquired, turning to her with a sudden look of interest.

She coloured and hesitated. "I have had a strange—experience, which papa considers a delusion. I daresay you will be of the same opinion."

"Suppose you tell me what it was?" he suggested.

She was silent, trifling with one of her silver bangles.

"Please excuse me," she said hurriedly, at length. "I don't care to speak of it; but papa will tell you." And before I could detain her, she had hurriedly left the room.

When we were alone he turned to me enquiringly, and in a few words I related to him what the reader already knows. He listened without interruption, and when I had finished, sat for some moments without speaking, thoughtfully stroking his beard.

He was evidently impressed by what he had heard, and I waited anxiously for his opinion. At length he looked up.

"Mr. Dysart," he said, gravely, "you will be surprised to learn that your daughter is not the first who has had this strange 'experience.' Previous tenants of The Cedars have heard exactly the sounds which she describes."

I pushed my chair back half-a-yard in my astonishment.

"Impossible!"

He nodded emphatically.

"It is a fact, though I don't pretend to explain it. These strange

manifestations have been noticed at intervals for the last three or four years ; ever since the house was occupied by a Captain Vandeleur, whose orphan nephew ——”

“Vandeleur ?” I interrupted ; “why, he was a client of ours. He insured his nephew’s life in our office for a large amount, and ——”

“And a few months afterwards, the child suddenly and mysteriously died ?” my companion put in. “A singular coincidence, to say the least of it.”

“So singular,” I acquiesced, “that we thought it a case for enquiry, particularly as the ex-captain did not bear the best of characters, and was known to be over head and ears in debt. But I am bound to say that after the closest investigation nothing was discovered to suggest a suspicion of foul play.”

“Nevertheless there *had* been foul play,” was the doctor’s reply.

“You don’t mean that he murdered the boy ! that pretty, fragile-looking little fellow ——”

“No, he did not murder him, but he let him die,” Dr. Cameron rejoined. “Perhaps you were not aware,” he continued, “that the little lad was somewhat feeble in mind as well as body ? I attended him more than once, at Vandeleur’s request, and found that among other strange fears and antipathies he had a morbid dread of darkness. To be left alone in a dark room for only a few minutes was enough to throw him into a paroxysm of nervous excitement. His uncle—who by the way, professed more affection for him than I could quite believe in, when I noticed how the child shrank from him—consulted me as to the best means of overcoming this weakness. I strongly advised him to humour it for the present, warning him that any mental shock might endanger the boy’s reason, or even his life. I little thought those words of mine would prove his death warrant.”

“What do you mean ?”

“Only a few days afterwards, Vandeleur locked him up all night in a dark closet, where he was found the next morning, crouching against the wall ; his hands clenched, his eyes fixed and staring—dead.”

“Good heavens, how horrible ! But no word of this was mentioned at the inquest ?”

“No ; and I did not hear of it myself till long afterwards, from a woman who had been Vandeleur’s housekeeper, but was too much afraid of him to betray him at the time. From her, too, I learnt by what refined cruelty the poor little lad’s nerves had been shaken and his health undermined. If ‘the intention makes the deed,’ James Vandeleur was a murderer.”

I was silent a moment, thinking, with an uncomfortable thrill, of Ethel’s dream. “I wish I had never entered this ill-omened house !” I exclaimed at length. “I dread the effect of this revelation on my daughter’s mind.”

“Why need you tell her ?” he questioned. “My advice is to say nothing more about it. The sooner she forgets the subject the better.

Send her away to the sea-side ; change of air and scene will soon efface it from her memory."

He rose as he spoke, and took up his hat.

"What has become of Vandeleur?" I enquired. "I have heard nothing of him since we paid the policy."

"He has been living abroad, I believe—going to the dogs, no doubt. But he is in England now," the doctor added: "or else it was his 'fetch' which I saw at your gate the other night."

"At our gate!" I echoed in astonishment. "What the deuce was he doing there?"

"He seemed to be watching the house. It was last Sunday evening. I had been dining with friends at Richmond, and on my way back, between eleven and twelve o'clock, I noticed a man leaning over the gate of The Cedars. On hearing footsteps he turned and walked away, but not before I had caught a glimpse of his face in the moonlight."

"And you are sure it was he?"

"Almost certain—though he was greatly altered for the worse. I have a presentiment do you know, that you will see or hear of him yourself before long," he added thoughtfully, as he shook hands and went his way.

I lost no time in following his advice with regard to Ethel, whom I despatched to Scarborough, in charge of my married sister, a few days later.

I had taken a hearty dislike to The Cedars, and resolved to get it off my hands as soon as might be.

Until another tenant could be found however, I continued to occupy it, going to and from town as before.

One evening I was sitting on the lawn, smoking an after-dinner cigar, and re-reading Ethel's last letter, which quite reassured me as to her health and spirits, when our sedate old housekeeper presented herself with the information that "a party" had called to see the house.

"A gentleman or a lady?" I enquired.

"A gentleman, sir, but he didn't give his name."

I found the visitor standing near the open window of the drawing-room ; a tall, gaunt man of thirty-five or thereabouts, with handsome but haggard features, and restless dark eyes. His lips were covered by a thick moustache, which he was nervously twisting as he stood looking out at the lawn.

"This house is to be let, I believe ; will you allow me to look over it?" he asked, turning towards me as I entered.

His voice seemed familiar ; I looked at him more closely, and then, in spite of the change in his appearance, I recognised Captain Vandeleur.

What could have brought him here, I wondered. Surely he would not care to return to the house, even if he were in a position

to do so—which, judging from the shabbiness of his appearance, seemed very doubtful.

Half-a-dozen vague conjectures flashed through my mind, as I glanced at his face, and noticed the restless, “hunted” look which told of some wearing dread or anxiety.

After a moment’s hesitation I assented to his request, and resolved to conduct him myself on his tour of inspection.

“I think I have met you before,” I said, feeling curious to know whether he recollected me.

He glanced at me absently.

“Possibly—but not of late years; for I have been living abroad,” was his reply.

Having shown him the apartments on the ground-floor, I led the way upstairs. He followed me from room to room in an absent, listless fashion, till we came to the chamber which Ethel had occupied. Then his interest seemed to revive all at once.

He glanced quickly round the walls, his eyes resting on the door of the box-closet.

“That is a bath or dressing-room, I suppose,” he said, nodding towards it.

“No, only a place for lumber. Perhaps I ought to tell you that it is said to be haunted,” I added, affecting to speak carelessly, while I kept my eyes on his face.

He started and turned towards me.

“Haunted—by what?” he enquired, with a faint sneer. “Nothing worse than rats or mice, I expect.”

“There is a tragical story connected with that place,” I answered, deliberately. “It is said that an unfortunate child was shut up there to die of fear, in the dark.”

The colour rushed to his face, then retreated, leaving it deadly white.

“Indeed!” he faltered; “and do you mean to say that he—the child—has been seen?”

“No, but he has been heard, knocking within, and crying to be let out. The fact is confirmed by every tenant who has occupied the house since ——”

I stopped short, startled by the effect of my revelation.

My companion was gazing at me with a blank stare of horror which banished all other expression from his face.

“Good heavens!” I heard him mutter; “can it be true? Can this be the reason why I was drawn back to the place in spite of myself?”

Recollecting himself, however, he turned to me, and forced his white lips into a smile.

“A mysterious story!” he commented, drily. “I don’t believe a word of it, myself, but I should hardly care to take a house with such an uncanny reputation. I think I need not trouble you any further.”

As he turned towards the door, I saw his figure sway as if he were

falling. He put his hand to his side, with a gasp of pain, a bluish shade gathering over his face.

"Are you ill?" I exclaimed, in alarm.

"I—it is nothing. I have a weakness of the heart, and I am subject to these attacks. May I ask you for a glass of water?"

I left the room to procure it. When I returned I found that he had fallen upon the bed in a dead swoon.

I hastily despatched a servant for Dr. Cameron, who happened to be at home, and came immediately.

He recognised my visitor at once, and glanced at me significantly. I rapidly explained what had happened, while he bent over the unconscious man, and bared his chest to listen to the heart-beats.

When he raised himself his face was ominously grave.

"Is he in danger?" I asked, quickly.

"Not in immediate danger, but the next attack will probably be his last. His heart is mortally diseased."

It was nearly an hour before Vandeleur awoke, and then only to partial consciousness. He lay in a sort of stupor, his limbs nerveless, his hands damp and cold.

"It is impossible to remove him in this condition," the doctor remarked; "I fear he must stay here for the night. I will send you someone to watch him."

"Don't trouble—I intend to sit up with him myself," I replied, speaking on an impulse I could hardly explain.

He looked at me keenly over his spectacles.

"Should you like me to share your watch?" he enquired, after a moment.

"I shall be only too glad of your company, if you can come without inconvenience."

He nodded.

"I must leave you now, but I will return in an hour," he responded.

Three hours had passed away; it was nearly midnight. The night was oppressively close, and profoundly still. The bedroom window stood wide open, but not a breath of air stirred the curtains. Outside, all was vague and dark, for neither moon nor stars were visible.

Vandeleur still lay, half-dressed, on the bed, but now asleep. His deep, regular breathing sounded distinctly in the silence. Dr. Cameron sat near the dressing-table, reading by the light of a shaded lamp. I, too, had a book, but found it impossible to keep my attention fixed upon it. My mind was possessed by an uneasy feeling, half dread, half expectation. I found myself listening nervously to fancied sounds, and starting when the doctor turned a leaf.

At length, overcome by the heat and stillness, I closed my eyes, and unconsciously sank into a doze. How long it lasted I cannot tell, but I woke abruptly, and looked round with a sense of vague alarm. I glanced at the doctor. He had laid down his book, and was leaning

forward with one arm on the dressing-table, looking intently towards the door of the box-room. Instinctively I held my breath and listened.

Never shall I forget the thrill that ran through my nerves when I heard from within a muffled knocking sound, and a child's voice, distinct, though faint, and broken by sobs, crying piteously : "Let me out—let me out!"

"Do you hear?" I whispered, bending forward to my companion.

He inclined his head in assent and motioned me to be silent, pointing towards the bed. Its occupant moved uneasily, as if disturbed, muttering some incoherent phrases. Suddenly he pushed back his covering and sat upright, gazing round with a wild, bewildered stare.

The pitiful entreaty was repeated more violently, more passionately than before. "Let me out, let me out!"

With a cry that rang through the room, Vandeleur sprang from the bed, reached the closet door in two strides and tore it open.

It was empty. Empty at least to our eyes, but it was evident that our companion beheld what we could not.

For a few breathless seconds he stood as if frozen, his eyes fixed with the fascination of terror on something just within the threshold; then, as if retreating before it, he recoiled step by step across the room till he was stopped by the opposite wall, where he crouched in an attitude of abject fear.

The sight was so horrible that I could bear it no longer.

"Are you dreaming? wake up!" I exclaimed, and shook his shoulder.

He raised his eyes, and looked at me vacantly. His lips moved, but no sound came from them. Suddenly a convulsive shudder ran through him and he fell heavily forward at my feet.

"He has swooned again," I said turning to my companion, who stooped and lifted the drooping head on to his knee.

After one glance, he laid it gently down again.

"He is dead," was his grave reply.

And with Vandeleur's death my story ends, for after that night the sounds were heard no more.

The forlorn little ghost was at rest.

